

TOWARDS LOCAL SOLUTIONS FOR NET ZERO: USING CLIMATHONS TO VISION FOOD AND FARMING FUTURES

In this policy brief we discuss the need to embed the net zero agenda in small-scale regions, to allow citizens to co-create solutions that are locally relevant. We demonstrate this with evidence from a British Academy-funded project that used adapted “Climathons” as a method to debate food and farming solutions in two UK rural farming regions. This approach was effective in convening rural land use stakeholders, providing space for constructive dialogue, strengthening existing networks and partnerships, and generating locally relevant net zero solutions that are being progressed beyond the event.



Accelerated progress across all sectors will be necessary for the UK to achieve its net zero ambitions, with increased focus on delivery (Climate Change Committee, 2022). There is a need to translate national-level goals into tangible actions for local communities, particularly in the agri-food sector due to geographical and cultural variation. Top-down approaches risk resistance, hence calls for “more, and better, democracy” (Willis, 2020) to address the climate crisis. Deliberative and participatory methods, including climate assemblies like the one convened by the UK government in 2020, provide ways for citizens to learn about climate change, discuss policy options, and develop recommendations (Elstub et al., 2021). These kinds of methods are highlighted in the latest CCC recommendations to improve “the acceptability of, and public support for, new policies” (Climate Change Committee 2022). “Climathons” represent a specific methodology that could contribute to net zero delivery, and have not previously been extensively researched.

In early 2022 we adapted the Climathon approach to deliver participatory events in two rural livestock farming communities: the Eden Valley in Cumbria, and the Bude area in Cornwall. Climathons are solution-oriented, often city-based events. They involve bringing together multidisciplinary teams to collaborate intensively over a short period, typically 12-72 hours. After hearing from experts about the topic in question and working in teams to develop solutions to a specific challenge, participants pitch their ideas to a panel of judges and a winning team is declared. To adapt this approach for rural livestock farming communities, we made seven key changes, summarised in the infographic on Page 2.

The power of stories

We adapted the Climathon approach with digital storytelling. This is a methodology focused on listening, which in this case involved local livestock farmers talking around the theme of change. The audio was then set over a series of photographs selected by the participant. This method helped ensure farmer voices were in the room when it was challenging for them to attend in person, and encouraged participants to empathise with the end users of agricultural net zero solutions.

Local solutions

The Climathon approach successfully generated locally relevant net zero solutions in the Eden Valley and Bude. These ranged in form: from a pilot project to promote on-farm renewable energy, to a project aimed at diversifying the local food system by increasing available land for growing vegetables, to planting 145km of new hedgerow in the Eden Valley by 2030 (the same length as the River Eden). Interestingly, both locations had a team that proposed enhancing farmer peer to peer learning- this was seen as a key mechanism for increasing knowledge and uptake of net zero solutions. The solutions are summarised in the live illustrations produced from each event, shown on Pages 3 and 4. Several of these have been further developed by participants since the Climathons; either seeking funding or feeding into existing work.

RURAL CLIMATHON PLAYBOOK SUMMARY

LESSONS FROM ADAPTING THE CLIMATHON METHOD TO VISION FOOD AND FARMING FUTURES IN RURAL COMMUNITIES



CONSORTIUM-BUILDING

DEDICATE TIME AND ENERGY TO WORKING WITH LOCAL PARTNERS EARLY ON



CREATIVE APPROACHES

INCORPORATE THESE TO FOSTER EMPATHY AND RECORD KEY MESSAGES FROM THE EVENT



STREAMLINED STRUCTURE

OPTIMISE THE SCHEDULE TO MAKE IT ACCESSIBLE FOR THE FARMING COMMUNITY AND PEOPLE WITH CHILDREN



OUTDOOR ACTIVITIES

BUILD OUTDOOR AND EXPERIENTIAL COMPONENTS INTO THE PROGRAMME



COLLABORATIVE CULTURE

CO-CREATE GROUND RULES WITH PARTICIPANTS AND REFRAME COMPETITIVE ELEMENTS



LOCAL FOOD

WORK WITH LOCAL CATERERS TO MAKE MEALS A HIGHLIGHT



ALIGN WITH LOCAL INITIATIVES

PLAN HOW THE EVENT WILL ADD VALUE TO EXISTING PROGRAMMES





Figure 2: live illustration from Bude Climathon

Lessons learnt

Our project demonstrated that a modified Climathon approach can be effective in rural communities for convening rural land use stakeholders, providing space for constructive dialogue, strengthening existing networks and partnerships, and generating locally relevant net zero solutions that can be progressed beyond the event itself.



We faced some challenges with recruitment, yet successfully attracted a range of rural land use stakeholders via a strong network of local partners. The format of the events meant they were still feasible to run with lower numbers than originally expected, and we found that those who did attend were very engaged. Therefore, although the events did not necessarily widen participation in the conversation on net zero and agri-food, they appear to have deepened the discussion and forged new connections among already interested parties.

While we successfully recruited a range of local land-use stakeholders and citizens in each location, we were advised by local partners to expect less engagement from the farming community, given the difficulty of spending a full day away from the farm. We mitigated this using digital storytelling, and in future would suggest greater attention to the farming calendar when planning events, and trialling alternative formats such as splitting the event across two half-days.



Implications for policy and practice

Our project demonstrates the value of de-centralising the net zero agenda and providing spaces for people to explore how it might apply to their community and/or industry. Well-designed events can inspire tangible action. Despite being likely cheaper and more agile than climate assemblies and other deliberative approaches, Climathons are more appropriate for deepening than widening engagement. However, their potential can be enhanced via some of the adaptations we suggest, and they could be a valuable tool in net zero delivery.

For any deliberative approach, we suggest that embedding the project in local initiatives and co-designing the event with those partners is key to success. There should also be a clear pathway for outputs, so that participants can see how their hard work may be taken forward (Devaney et al., 2020). Furthermore, the time and energy required to develop a consortium and build trust with local partners should not be underestimated.

Key recommendations

- Embed the net zero agenda in local regions around the UK through deliberative approaches enhanced with creative methods.
- Involve local authorities and key stakeholders early in project cycles.
- Adapt the approach to suit local contexts- Climathons are highly adaptable and represent one method among many options.
- Design projects in collaboration with local partners to maximise utility and provide added value on top of their existing work.
- Set reasonable expectations for 1- or 2-day events, and connect these to wider programmes and suites of activities.
- Define the pathway for outputs at the start of the project so it is clear to participants how their work will be taken forward.

In response to the latest Climate Change Committee (2022) recommendations, this evidence could inform a Defra-led Net Zero Delivery Strategy (p.522), as well as contributing to strategies for engaging with small and medium-sized enterprises on decarbonisation (p.480), and informing action to overcome non-financial barriers that prevent adoption of low-carbon farming measures (p.560).



References

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This policy brief can be referenced as:

Simmonds, P., Maye, D., Gardner, A., Ingram, J. and Raseta, S. (2022), Towards local solutions for net zero: Using Climathons to vision food and farming futures, Countryside and Community Research Institute Report, University of Gloucestershire.

The research underpinning this policy brief was funded by The British Academy as part of their 'Shared Understandings of a Sustainable Future' scheme. Project number: SSF\210091.